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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000219

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT 2008: ALL HAT, NO CATTLE

REF: A. DAMASCUS 210  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 198  
[1](#)C. CAIRO 641  
[1](#)D. CAIRO 580

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reason 1.  
4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Proclaiming the March 29-30 Arab League Summit an "historic event," the Syrian government trumpeted its ability to overcome alleged U.S. efforts to torpedo the proceedings while trying to avoid open controversy over the lack of any progress in Lebanon. Eleven heads of state presented speeches, attended closed door secessions, and witnessed AL SecGen Amre Moussa read the "Damascus Declaration," a statement describing the deeply divided state of Arab relations and the overriding need for unity to solve problems in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan. Moussa and Syrian FM Moullem joked in the summit's concluding press conference about Syria's willingness to engage in Lebanon, even as delegations left Damascus unclear about what the AL's next steps would be. Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi's colorful speech raised eyebrows and elicited chuckles among attendees and Syrians watching the proceedings on TV. But Qaddafi's candor on the internal and external problems facing the Arab world was seen as an accurate depiction of the lack of unity among Arab states. In the end, the absence of nearly half of League member heads of state, particularly those of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, underscored Arab disharmony and the AL's lack of purpose. End Summary

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Syrians Declare Victory  
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[1](#)2. (C) March 31 headlines of Syrian papers and media broadcasts declared victory over alleged U.S. efforts to sabotage this year's Arab League Summit. Long stories about Bashar al-Asad's sturdy spine and wise vision permeated the airwaves, as Syrians returned to normal routines that had been interrupted by the presence of thousands of heavily armed security forces deployed in and around the Syrian capital.

[1](#)3. (C) Most of our contacts acknowledged that the absence of 11 heads of Arab state deeply undercut the Syrian regime's attempt to assert its image as a leader of the Arab world. At the same time, one contact compared this summit to previous Arab League gatherings by noting "the bar for the success of any Arab League Summit is low." Even staunchly nationalistic sources such as Riad Abrash expressed a sense of relief the summit had passed. Summing up the main reactions we've heard, a taxi driver told us in an unsolicited reaction that "The summit did not fix anything but it did not make things worse. Thank God it is over."

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Anything of Substance?  
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14. (C) Press contacts painted to us a picture of exhausted delegations who labored long hours in the lead up to the closing session. In addition to a 25-minute presentation during the summit's final plenary by AL SecGen Amre Moussa, the summit produced a 150-page document of "resolutions" that was released after the event's conclusion. Syrian contacts in general reacted positively to President Asad's introductory intervention and his management of the proceedings, with many expressing relief that he observed decorum and did not set aside his text in favor of an emotional, off-the-cuff diatribe as he had done on previous occasions. Asad focused in detail on Israeli actions, the need to address divisions in the Arab world, and Syria's willingness to work with other countries to help support a consensus agreement in Lebanon.

15. (C) Lebanon: According to Western press contacts who attended the proceedings, there appeared to be some visibly negative reactions to statements by Bashar and FM Muallem that they would continue to ignore "calls for Syria to intervene in Lebanon." An Egyptian Embassy contact said a number of Arab delegations made a point of calling out Bashar during the closed head of state dinner on March 29 on Syria's role in the current crisis. Moussa's call for the election of a consensus president reflected the sense of most of the Arab officials present, according to one Syrian journalist. Muallem, however, was not about to be outmaneuvered and repeatedly stressed Syria's interpretation of the Arab League's "package deal" that made Michel Suleiman's election

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conditional on agreement on a cabinet and a new election law.

16. (C) AL Peace Initiative: After Syrian efforts to weaken support for 2002 Arab League peace initiative, Arab delegations rallied around an AL-brokered proposal to call for an evaluation of the Arab peace strategy and to assess Israeli behavior. Whether the AL will actually meet to conduct such an assessment is anyone's guess, according to an Egyptian contact. But the Syrians were definitely interested in trying to call attention to "Israeli aggression, settlement expansion, and the siege in Gaza" and were able to do so without much opposition, he said.

17. (C) Palestinian Issues: Though Moussa's statement supported the Yemeni initiative, the absence of Yemeni President Saleh left many wondering whether the agreement to resume dialogue between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority would go forward. A Palestinian contact told us that Abu Mazen left with no intention of giving ground without Hamas acceptance of preconditions set out in the draft Yemeni agreement -- most notably, renunciation of violence, acceptance of previous peace agreements, early elections, and restoration of the status quo ante in Gaza. Many here read a March 30 interview by Hamas Politburo Chief Khaled Meshal, in which he declared Gilad Shalit alive and well, as a Syrian effort to reinforce Syria's support for Hamas.

18. (C) Iraq: The air of cordiality that had presided over the two day event was broken briefly in the waning minutes of the summit when Iraq attempted to register a reservation on the final wording of the Damascus Declaration. A line which had been included on previous summit resolutions, one explicitly condemning terrorist operations in Iraq, had been omitted. The final resolution echoed previous declarations calls for full sovereignty, quick ending of the foreign presence, national reconciliation and the secession of hostilities between Iraqis.

19. (C) Iran: FM Mottaki's uneventful attendance appeared

to cause some stress among Arab leaders and even with the Syrian hosts. Turkish Embassy contacts told us FM Muallem's body language around Mottaki was unmistakably stiff and that the two did not seem to be getting along. (Note: We still haven't heard whether Mottaki had any active role behind the scenes.)

¶10. (C) Final Documents: In response to the name of Moussa's statement the "Damascus Declaration," locals are joking that Moussa and delegate leaders might suffer the same fate of Syrian dissidents and members of Syria's Damascus Declaration opposition movement and end up in prison. The prevailing view of local contacts and foreign press was that Moussa's statement was "depressing." Marked by a 150-page document of summit "resolutions," the summit outcome was described by one local reporter as being like an omnibus spending bill - each delegation having inserted their own "pet projects" without any oversight resulting in an ineffective and incoherent product.

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"Arab Unity"  
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¶11. (C) While cordiality reigned over most of the summit compared to the infamous public sniping and walkouts of recent summits, there were some cracks in the armor, particularly in the summit's closed sessions. According to open source reporting, the only entertainment of the summit came when Libyan leader Moammar Qadaffi both shocked and amused the delegations when he mocked and chided fellow Arab leaders for their disunity and inaction in his opening statement. Qadaffi's words, "we are enemies of ourselves...we all hate each other...our intelligence and security organs are conspiring against each other...our blood and our language may be one, but there is nothing that can unite us" seemed to resonate with the public at large as several contacts commented that of all the people to speak at the summit, he "surprisingly" made the most coherent argument, according to many Syrians with whom we spoke about the summit.

¶12. (C) Comment: FM Muallem summed up the SARG line best by saying "the fact that it happened made it a success." Stung by the absence of high-level reps from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Syrian MFA sources were telling local press contacts that they would be reaching out to several countries who had indicated a desire to send high-level delegations but refrained from doing so because of Saudi and/or U.S. pressure. In the meantime, we're hearing that AL SecGen

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Moussa may be traveling soon to Lebanon to see if there is any more room for maneuver. But we see no concession coming from Syria in the near future.

CORBIN